

Hon. Joseph R. Pitts

Member

Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important and timely hearing on U.S. Policy Towards the OSCE. As our nation engages in the war against terror, it is vital that we use all avenues at our disposal to address the very real threat facing our nation, the nations of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In addition, it is vital that our nation builds and strengthens the relationships we have with friends and allies around the world.

In order to focus on terrorism, and other important concerns facing our world today, such as trafficking in persons and religious and ethnic discrimination and persecution, the U.S. government needs to be deeply involved in the various fora of which we are a party. Unfortunately, the US government has not been as involved or present as it could be – in the end that damages our relationships with other nations. Over the last several decades, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has played an important role in providing stability in volatile situations as well as additional opportunities for diplomacy and the exploration of creative resolutions to pressing issues. I have attended the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly the past several years and have been impressed with the level of participation from OSCE participating nations – however, the US presence tends to be less than it could be – it has only been as strong as it has due to the leadership of Chairman Chris Smith. Thank you, Mr. Chairman for your very able, and strong leadership at the various OSCE meetings.

I would like to take this opportunity to urge the Administration to engage even more fully in the OSCE and with OSCE participating states and partners. Yesterday's Washington Post article and other media outlets' reports reflect President Putin's new plans to deprive the Russian people of their freedoms. The U.S. and other nations need to engage with the Russians NOW. As they tragically did in Russia last week, extremists are attempting to disrupt and dominate politics throughout the world. While our response must be firm, it must also be just. We cannot afford to compromise human rights for the sake of security, or we play into the hands of the terrorist. OSCE nations must not let the extremists and terrorists win.

Unfortunately, as governments crack down on terrorism, there are many peaceful religious believers and citizens who are arrested by officials. Now, more than ever, we must work to ensure that fundamental human rights are protected. Now is the time to help national lawyers, journalists, religious leaders, and others who seek to promote democracy and freedom in their nations. We must support courageous leaders who stand for freedom in the midst of fierce opposition from secret security forces and official government pressure. Now is the time for us to strengthen and build relationships with other nations, to work together to bring safety, security and peace to our world.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses.